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## **Make re-cycled the new new**

**For re-use to become the norm psychological biases that make people squeamish about repurposing others' possessions must be overcome, says Bruce Hood.**

Humans are unique in the animal kingdom in our capacity for materialism. We make, use and trade objects for their symbolic value as much as their functionality. One of the earliest examples – a piece of carved ochre found in the Blombus Cave in South Africa – dates from at least 70,000 years ago. Possessions are extensions of our selves. Beyond making tools we adorn ourselves and bury our dead with them.

Objects have social significance. Through them we signal our identity and status to others. Marketing experts know that belongings convey aspirations that owners wish to display to others. Designer goods and labels have cache because of their expense or exclusivity. To all but the most ascetic among us it is important to some degree what others think about our choice of gadgets, car, décor or clothing.

These mores of ownership inform the value we assign fakes or those who own them. When it comes to second-hand goods, most of us care about who previously handled them and what they were used for – we would rather wear the sweater of a celebrity than a murderer. We reverently hand great grandma's paste jewellery to the next generation, but toss last season's bling from the high street. It is as if something tangible has imbued the very substance of the object.

Underpinning these unconscious, often irrational, preferences is psychological essentialism – a belief that identity is conferred by a metaphysical dimension, an essence that cannot be removed, filtered, eradicated or re-purposed by physical means. Countering these biases with logic is difficult.

But countered they must be. Because essentialism presents a formidable obstacle to accepting -- as we must -- that all materials can and should be re-used or re-cycled. To realise a circular economy, the perceived status and value of re-used materials must be changed. How? I think the answer requires us to shift the value we place on objects based on their exclusivity to one that prioritizes their historical reuse.

## **Markers of status**

Some have argued that today's rampant consumerism reflects an obsession with gaining status that originated from our evolved capacity to live in hierarchical social groups where possessions equated with success [1]. Status determines reproductive success in many social animals. Just as the peacock's large and lustrous tail signals his health and strength to prospective mates, so too does evident material wealth.

Over a century ago, American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption" as the attaining and exhibiting of costly items to

impress others [2]. From Egyptian pharaohs to Incan potentates and Indian maharajahs, he argued that many people in power flaunt their wealth to signal superiority. Not much has changed over millennia.

What has changed is our ability to make more possessions for all. Our accumulated store of manufactured goods has risen exponentially along with the power of our technologies to increase production. For example, between 1860 and 1920 US production increased by 12 to 14 times while the population only tripled. The amount of stuff we could make outstripped demand, which needed stimulating to maintain economic growth. Marketing strategies since have reinforced consumerism as a necessary component of self-worth, creating problems from mild binges of 'retail therapy' to pathological over-spending.

This incentive to own did not require much effort – even children are selfish about possessions. About 75% of preschoolers' conflicts with peers revolve around ownership. Toys are more coveted when they have been touched or named by another child, consistent with competition. We soon learn to define ourselves by what we own. Psychologist Sam Gosling, author "Snoop: What your stuff says about you," has demonstrated links between different personality types and the sorts of objects adults adorn their personal spaces with as an expression of self-identity [3]. For example, neurotics are more likely to put up inspirational posters in their offices and in general males tend to display trophies whereas women are more likely to adorn their spaces with objects associated with personal relationships.

As we tend to view ourselves positively, we project greater value onto our own possessions than others would – an impulse called the endowment effect. This bias varies amongst cultures and is stronger in individualistic compared to interdependent societies. For example, European American adults ask for a much higher selling price for their coffee mug than they would be willing to pay compared to Asian American adults. Priming Chinese and Japanese adults to think about themselves can shift the endowment effect in the same direction as Westerners [4].

Surprisingly, the endowment effect may be stronger where there are more rather than fewer possessions. For example, the Hadza hunter-gatherers of Tanzania are all equally poor with few possessions and do not normally exhibit endowment effects. But it is not simply a case of haves and have-nots. According to Yale psychologist, Nicholas Christakis, the endowment effect arises when inequality in individualistic societies is visible to all [5]. When it comes to economic harmony, ignorance is bliss.

### **Extensions of self**

According to the "extended self" hypothesis [6], our self is everything that we can claim ownership over. A person who owns a nice home, a new car, good furniture and the

latest appliances, is recognized by others as someone who has passed the test of personhood in our society.

The pleasure one derives from a Rolex watch or an Armani suit is largely psychological and based on perceived desirability rather than sensory or functional payoff. Designer brands are esteemed beyond their craftsmanship and quality. By definition, a luxury item (from the Latin, *luxus* meaning excess) generates value from its exclusivity. Lobsters and oysters command high prices in today's restaurants, but in the 18<sup>th</sup> century before refrigeration allowed them to be shipped to cities they were the food of poor fishing communities.

Authenticity also matters. Reproduction or fake brands are valued less even though they can be indistinguishable from an original. And we cannot always fool ourselves. One study showed that individuals who wore what they believe to be fake designer sunglasses felt sullied and were more inclined to dishonesty, even when the glasses were expensive originals [7].

### **Psychological essentialism**

The psychological bias to value exclusivity and authenticity undermines the principles of re-cycling and re-use. Re-cycled items lack authenticity, which compromises their identity and perceived value.

Most adults reason, for example, that if our gold wedding ring was swapped with an identical duplicate then it would not be the same ring. If we were told that our ring was partially renovated by replacing a small particle of the metal, we would regard it as the same ring. If we were told that over time the ring was completely renovated, we would still think it the same ring even when there was no original material present – the same as the swapped ring. Thus we infer that there is an essential property of the ring beyond its physical make-up that continues its identity.

Such retained identity could operate by contamination. Each new particle of gold added to the ring becomes assimilated into the whole. Simply by touch, objects take on the property of the owner as if by contagion. For example, memorabilia collectors will pay inflated prices for a sweater that they believe was worn by a popular celebrity, but much less if it is sterilized. Conversely they will pay little for one that belonged to a disliked figure (such as a financial fraudster) unless it has been sterilized [8].

Even 7-year-olds rate original possessions supposedly belonging to Queen Elizabeth II as more valuable than an identical copy. Using a conjuring trick, children were convinced that a duplicating machine could produce identical physical objects. Again, higher values were given to the original [9].

### **Our Materialist Future**

So we value old items for their sentimentality, nostalgia or connection with the famous, yet we covet new items that signal success because of their exclusivity. In the same way that conspicuous consumerism was encouraged to redress the over-production and demand imbalance, we have to re-think how we use objects as status items to define who we are.

Market forces can manipulate our perceptions of what should be considered valuable as demonstrated by changing attitudes to second hand goods. For example, people no longer want antiques in their homes. The Antique Collectors' Club's Annual Furniture Index, based on a mix of auction and retail prices of 1,400 typical items, has been on a slide for more than a decade after reaching a peak of 3,575 in 2002.

We need to make it more socially desirable to own and use re-cycled goods. The more an artefact has been made out of re-cycled materials, the more we should advertise this quality. Already a few retailers sell items such as purses and bags that have been made ingeniously out of discarded goods such as cement sacks or tyres. This process known as "up-cycling" takes discarded low value items and re-purposes them into higher value products but this is still a relatively small novelty market.

In the past, necessity required re-cycling and up-cycling during economic hardship which is why it is still common practice in today's impoverished societies. However, we need to think beyond our immediate economic situations in order to address the long-term consequences of unbridled materialism.

In the same way that our food products have to declare constituents and additives, manufactured goods should indicate the extent of re-cycled content. Packaging manufacturers often state the proportion of re-cycled materials that have been used but rarely does the same disclosure apply to the product contained within.

This might start to shift attitudes away from the appeal of the "brand new" to appreciating the value of the "brand renewed" - something that will be essential in a circular economy.

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